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JOSEPH BÉDIER'S "CRIMES ALLEMANDS"

A CRITIQUE

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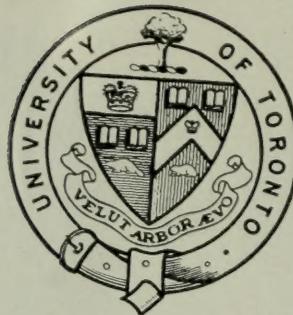
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PREFATORY NOTE

There was undisguised rejoicing in the camp of neutral America when Professor Joseph Bédier of the College de France published his pamphlet, *Les Crimes Allemands d'après des Témoignages Allemands*. The tales of German atrocities which our neutral press had printed so conscientiously but which afterwards, quite atrociously, had been branded as falsehoods by German as well as American writers, could now be relished as thoroughly reliable. A noted French scholar trained in Germany had taken the trouble to shatter the growing doubts of French veracity by publishing alleged facsimiles of diaries taken from imprisoned or killed German soldiers and by interpreting them according to the most approved scientific methods of French philological research.

In the March number of the *Outlook* of 1915 Professor Raymond Weeks of Columbia University has the following to say concerning Professor Bédier's performance: "It is not necessary to introduce M. Bédier to the university public in the United States, where the distinguished professor of the Collège de France is esteemed the best living authority on mediaeval French literature and the most recent molder of methods of research in our literary seminaries. More than that: whoever says 'Joseph Bédier' has not only spoken the watchword of scientific research, but that of the most absolute, the most impeccable honesty. No qualified savant can be found, even in Germany, who will doubt the integrity and fairness of M. Bédier. Here, then, is a scholar who is trained as few are to know the value of written documents, and who at the same time would not falsify so much as a comma for any consideration on earth."

Almost simultaneously with Professor Weeks's touching tribute to his patron saint, there appeared in the *Svensk Tidskrift* (1915, pp. 221-227), one of the leading Swedish periodicals, a review of Bédier's pamphlet which, strange to say, has hitherto remained concealed from Professor Bédier's American friends.

It is for these friends and admirers of the great French savant that, with the consent of its distinguished author, in the following pages the Swedish review is published in English translation. Not only will they find in it new evidence of the impeccable honesty, integrity and fairness of the good man who would not falsify so much as a comma for any consideration on earth, but they will also discover a new gem in the crown of his accomplishments: his remarkable talent as a translator of German who can read from the documents whatever suits his purpose.

The readers who desire to gain further insight into the scientific methods and the motives of Professor Bédier are referred to the excellent pamphlet, *Professor Bédier und die Tagebücher deutscher Soldaten* (Berlin, 1915), by Professor Karl Larsen, the well-known Danish scholar, and to the booklet, *Deutsche Verbrechen* (Bielefeld und Leipzig, 1915), by Professor Max Kuttner.

THE GERMAN TESTIMONIALS ABOUT GERMAN ATROCITIES

J. Bédier's book, *Les Crimes Allemands d'après des Témoignages Allemands*, is considered by many the most reliable support for the opinion that in the war now going on the Germans have been guilty of atrocities and acts of violence to a much greater extent proportionally than is usual during the hard times of war. At first glance its proofs seem to be the most authentic: documents coming from the Germans themselves. Its author is a prominent scholar. The work also purports to be the product of the most exact scholarly method. About the manner in which he has treated his sources, the author says: "j'ai pris le soin d'en faire la critique avec autant de minutie et de scrupule que naguère, lorsque, dans les travaux de la paix, je discutais l'autorité d'une vieille chronique ou l'authenticité d'une charte." The evidence presented in the book should accordingly be particularly examined from the philological point of view.

The documents used, not quite forty in number, consist for the greater part of diaries which have been kept by German soldiers later captured by the French. From eleven such books the author has selected in all fifteen pages, which he publishes in facsimile in their entirety or in part; besides, he gives four facsimiles from articles from two German papers. These facsimiles, eighteen in all, accordingly constitute his evidence proper, and it is chiefly this evidence which is here to be made the subject of an examination. The defects which I shall call attention to are to be explained, no doubt, to a not inconsiderable extent, by the circumstance that the author's scientific specialty is not the German language.

If we first examine the author's transcription of the soldiers' notes, which are usually written in German script, we find that this has not always been done with due care and exactness. A few inaccuracies the author has no doubt allowed himself for the purpose of making the text more intelligible to the general public. I shall only point out here the errors in transcription which consist in the insertion of other words than those of the original or of the omission of words and punctuation important for the meaning or of the wrong arrangement of the different sections. I shall confine myself here to passages quite legibly written. These errors are:

1. In place of the period before "Hatte", page 8, line 8 from below, the facsimile, figure 1, line 1 from below, has a colon; instead of "verschossen", page 18, line 2 from below, figure 7, line 7, has "erschossen"; page 24, line 5 from below, "seit" is omitted, figure 10, line 3; instead of "gestört", page 24, line 2 from below, figure 10, line 12, has "zerstört"; page 26, line 1 from below, the dash of figure 12, line 4 from below, is missing; instead of "schöne Kuh nebst 1 Kalb eingeschossen", page 31, figure 13, lines 12, 13, has "scheue Kuh nebst Kalb angeschossen"; page 38, there is lacking between lines 4 and 3 from below the large space between lines 7 and 6 from below of figure 17.

Some of these errors are, to be sure, not of particular importance for the interpretation, but they show that the author has not proceeded with

due "minutie" and "scrupule", and they also show, in part, that the author does not have sufficient knowledge of the German language. Some errors, on the contrary, are of decisive importance for the understanding of the text.

Of such importance is, to begin with, the period of page 8, line 8, which in the author's transcription has replaced a colon, figure 1, line 1 from below, in the following passage: "Altar und Decken sind eingestürzt: Hatte auch Telefon Verbindung mit dem Feind." This colon shows that what follows has the purpose of explaining why the church had been fired upon so that the altar and the arches had fallen down; the reason was: (the church) "had telephonic connection with the enemy", i. e., it was connected by means of telephone wires with the place where the enemy was. After the intimate connection between this clause and the preceding one had been obscured by the exchange of a period for the colon, Bédier has interpreted "Hatte auch Telefon-Verbindung mit dem Feind" (to which he has added a "man" as subject) as belonging to the whole account of the Germans' stern activities in the village and as giving the cause of all these activities. And through the expression with which the author comments on this interpretation: *Juste répression, dit ce soldat: "on avait le téléphone avec l'ennemi"*, the reader not well familiar with the German language easily gets the impression that the soldier had even expressly declared that the telephone connection with the enemy had been the cause, and a justifiable cause, of all the acts of violence, although the soldier's words do not necessarily purport to give more than the cause of the destruction of the *church*.

The above-mentioned omission of a dash in the author's transcription and translation, figure 12, line 4 from below, has resulted in placing the passage in question in an entirely wrong light. But more than that. The passage has been entirely misinterpreted by the author because he has not taken into account, and has in his transcription and translation not given, enough of the context. From the passage in question he quotes only the following: "Einschlagen von Granaten in die Häuser. Abends Feldgesang: *Nun danket alle Gott*", which he translates: "Lancements de grenades incendiaires dans les maisons. Le soir, choral militaire: *Nun danket alle Gott! (Maintenant, remerciez tous Dieu!)*." This B. gives as proof that there are German soldiers "qui, leur laide besogne faite, ouvrent leur livre de cantiques et chantent des psaumes." It should, however, be noted that the passage immediately preceding does not at all treat of any "laide besogne" which the writer had committed. For this passage runs as follows (see figure 12; I put in parentheses unclear and uncertain letters): "Am Tage nach der Maasz zu vorgezogen. (Fe)i(n)d (in) Pässen gedeckte Stellung. Gewehrfeuer ü(ber) uns (:) Ca. 5 Stunden (hier) ver(s)p)errt (.) Nachm. ge(g)en 4° (weiteres) Vorgehen nach den steilen Ufern der Maasz. Hierselbst in einem Wald Sammeln des 1. Batallion(s) Vor uns der Feind: starke *Beschieszung der Stadt Dinant, helles Brennen* der Häuser. Umherirren von Franzosen, Belgiern [Beobachtungen dur(c)h Gläser] Einschlagen von Granaten in die Häuser.—" Then there begins on a new line a passage marked as a new section by the dash which Bédier

omits: "Abends F(e)ldgesang: *Nun danket alle Gott.*"— Accordingly in this note there are described a day of advance together with the effects of the attack on the city of Dinant as seen at a distance by the writer. And as far as the mentioned "Einschlagen von Granaten in die Häuser" is concerned, the writer and his (battalion-)comrades did not take part in this, as is clear from the fact that they were at a distance from Dinant and were "du 177:e d'infanterie" (B., page 26). The singing of a hymn of thanksgiving told by the soldier does not, therefore, stand as the end of any "laide besogne" committed by the writer and his comrades in song, nor is there described here, as the author says (page 26), any "sac": pillaging of Dinant, which ended with the hurling of incendiary bombs into the houses. The hymn-singing is mentioned, in a note separated by a dash from what immediately precedes, *as the conclusion of the entire day described*, with its hardships and dangers.

Further, the author's translation of "Einschlagen von Granaten in die Häuser" as "Lancements de grenades incendiaires (incendiary bombs) dans les maisons" is not correct. The word "incendiaires" has been added, and has no equivalent in the original text, which merely speaks of grenades. "Einschlagen" is not to be taken as "lancement" (hurling, throwing in), but means "falling down", "striking"; (thus Bismarck speaks in a letter of "das Sausen und Einschlagen der Granaten"). In the words in question the soldier therefore merely relates that he and his comrades had seen how, in the attack on Dinant, shells had struck the houses.—

By neglecting to take notice of the large space before line 6 from below in the notes in figure 17, the author has been strengthened in his interpretation of these notes, which have been the cause of one of the worst accusations against the Germans. The section in question, together with that preceding it reads:

"Neben der gerecht(en) Wut der Soldat(en) schreitet aber auch purer Vandali In ganz leere(n) Dörf(ern) setzen sie den roten Hahn ganz willk(ü)rlich auf die Häuser. (M)ir tun die Leute leit. Wenn sie auch unfaire Waffen gebrauch(en) so verte(i)digen sie doch nur ihr Vaterland."

Then in line 6 from below there begins a new section, marked by a large space (this new section the author in his transcription prints immediately after the preceding section):

"Die Grausamk(ei)te(n) dis ver(ü)bt wurde(n) & noch werde(n) v(on) s(e)it(en) der Bürger werd(en) (er)nst gerächt".

Thereupon there follows after a smaller space a new section:

"V(e)rstümmlung(en) der Verwunde(ten) sind an Tagesord(nun)g."

Instead of "(er)nst gerächt", line 3 from below, the author has read "wüst gerächt". Of the word preceding "gerächt", however, the last three letters appear clearly as *-nst*; in the first letter of the word, "e-", the loop is, to be sure, a little blotted, but still it can clearly be made out; the letter between *e*- and *-nst* is in great part deleted, but "*e nst*" can not be emended except so as to read "*e(r)nst*", wherefore this word is here to be regarded as entirely certain.

Which is it now, Belgians or Germans, who have committed the mutilations of wounded that are related in the notes?

"Verstümmlung der Verwundeten" probably is explanatory of "ernst gerächt" or "wüst gerächt". Certainly in view of the context.

The author, who without taking note of the large space before line 6 from below has connected the matter beginning there with the following section where the writer criticizes *German* acts of violence, has come hereby to take for granted that also that which follows purports to be criticism of the Germans.

When he in addition has read this matter in such a way that the writer accuses the Germans of having taken vengeance "wüst" ("d'une façon sauvage"), he has been further strengthened in this opinion and in accord with it he has interpreted the mutilations of wounded mentioned in the following as referring to the "wild", barbaric way in which the Germans were supposed to have taken vengeance. But since the words "Die Grausamkeiten" begin a new section, which deals with atrocities committed by the Belgians, it is evident that the writer is engaged in a new line of thought and wants to show what the *Belgians* have been guilty of. Under these circumstances it is most probable that in the next section he follows up this line of thought and accordingly means by "Verstümmelungen" to give examples of the mentioned "Grausamkeiten" committed by the Belgians.

Far from being able to be used "pour montrer à quel point il est usuel dans l'armée allemande de mutiler des blessés", this note therefore on the contrary rather shows that German wounded had been exposed to such cruelty.

The same accusation against the Germans the author also tries to strengthen by means of three facsimiles (figures 14, 15, 16) of passages from a German country paper, in which a noncommissioned officer from the place gives a description of the war. But in this it is a question of giving the death-blow to the wounded—or to such as pretended to be wounded—in the heat of battle, and in such a situation it can not be expected that the soldiers should have time and cold-bloodedness enough to determine which enemies were sufficiently wounded so that they could be allowed to live without risk to the soldier in question or his comrades.—Besides, the author gives another facsimile (figure 13), a page from a German soldier's diary, where we read: "Im Wald ein(e) sehr scheue Kuh nebst Kalb angeschossen gefunden (und) wieder franz Leichen schreck(lich) verstümmelt." This passage of course proves nothing, since even the author has to admit that these bodies may have been "mutilés par des armes loyales". Moreover, we notice here that in Bédier's transcription the sentence has been changed (or made unclear) by placing a semicolon after "gefunden"; for "wieder" belongs (cf. figure, lines 2, 3) to "gefunden", not to "verstümmelt". But the author does not confine himself to producing such documents which prove nothing, as support for the opinion that the Germans have mutilated the wounded. With the same object he also gives (page 29), within *quotation marks*, a document that he has never seen! According to this, which is alleged to be an order of the day issued by a German general, the general commanded his soldiers to kill "Werwundete ob mit Waffen oder Wehrlos", as the author's "citation" reads. Bédier says, to be sure, that he can not "produire l'autographe même du général", but the unsuspecting reader may on account

of the quotation marks that are employed not help thinking that the author has had access to a printed copy of the order of the day. Only in a later edition of his work does Bédier feel that he ought to state openly that the alleged order of the day had only been issued orally, and that, consequently, the form in which he had published it—according to the reports of German prisoners of war who had been examined—“peut-être soit incomplète, soit alterée”!

I have had occasion above to point out a passage (“Einschlagen von Granaten”) which has been incorrectly translated by the author. Certain other translations also give occasion for comment. Most serious are the following misinterpretations, on which he builds another particularly serious accusation against the Germans. On page 19 the author translates “Aber da gab es Feuer” (figure 8, lines 12, 13): “mais là, incendie”. As appears from the context and also from the fact that “Feuer” in the German military language is the technical expression for firing (a gun), the words mean, instead: “But then they fired” (cf., for example, in an account of a battle which appears in one of the latest numbers of the periodical *Die Hilfe*, number 9, page 136: “es gibt Feuer über Feuer von vorn, von den Flanken, ja halb von hinten”); “incendie” the soldier would, on the contrary, certainly have expressed by some other common word of this meaning (“Brand”, perhaps). The passage in which the words in question occur is the following, written mostly without marks of punctuation, so that the reader must in part himself try to determine the distribution of the sentences and clauses: “Die Einwohner die verziehen wollten konnten sich nac(h) Wunsch ergeben, wo sie wollten Abe(r) der schosz der wurde erschossen Als w(i)r aus Ovele marschierten knatte(r)ten die Gewehre Aber da gab es Feuer Weiber und Alle(s).” As is seen, the soldier expresses himself very briefly. It is, however, clear (and Bédier has also apparently interpreted it so) that the shots which “knatterten” came from the local inhabitants. “Aber da gab es Feuer”, on the contrary, clearly refers to a volley with which the departing troops (cf. the preceding: “Aber der schosz, der wurde erschossen”), replied to the attack.—Through his misinterpretation of the word “Feuer” the author has also incorrectly come to connect “Weiber und Alles” as accusatives with “gab es”. For, taking “Aber da gab es Feuer Weiber und Alles” as one sentence, he translates it “mais là, incendie, femmes, et le reste . . . ” This is supposed to imply (cf. also the author’s note: “Je respecte en cette phrase l’obscurité, sans doute volontaire, du texte original”), that the departing troops not only set fire to the houses in Ovele, but also violated the women en masse! But as “da gab es Feuer” means “then they fired”, it is of course impossible that “Weiber und Alles” belongs directly with these words. Professor Karl Larsen in an article about Bédier’s book has taken for granted that the soldier omitted an “auf” before “Weiber”, so that the passage in question would mean: “Then they fired (on) women and everything”. But since one of the most important principles of scientific textual criticism is not to make additions in a text except when absolutely necessary, it seems to me that another interpretation of the passage is preferable: after “Feuer” a period should be placed, and the three following words no doubt stand as an elliptical exclamatory sentence:

“Weiber und Alles!” (cf. Bédier’s justified procedure in adding an exclamation point after “moment” in translating a passage at the beginning of the notes in question). By this exclamation the soldier expresses his pity over the fact that also “women and everything” could be subjected to the shots; that this soldier was particularly tender-hearted in regard to the women in the terrors of war is clear from a similar exclamation that he has written farther up on the same page. Parallels to such elliptical sentences are found also elsewhere in the diary notes, naturally often very brief; cf., for example, the citation made above from figure 12, and particularly the elliptical sentence given by Bédier, bottom of page 8: “Mutter mit ihren beiden Kinder!”

Elsewhere in his book the author says (page 23) that of the 33 or 34 German soldiers in whose notes he had found accounts of acts of violence, there were only three who “racontant des choses ignobles, s’étonnent, s’indignent, s’attristent”. From his own excerpts one can see, however, that a considerably larger number have used expressions that show that they had had their feelings aroused by the sights they had seen. Such expressions are: pages 7, 8, “grauenhaft all(e)s anzusehen”, “Schrecklich alles mit anzusehen”; page 10, note 1: “Ein schreckliches Blutbad”; page 11: “solche Scheusslichkeiten kommen hoffentlich nicht wieder vor”; page 13: “Frauen und Kinder . . . muszten dem entsetzlichen Schauspiele zusehen”; page 16: “Das Mädel konnte mir leid tun”, etc.; page 18: “das war ein Anblick der Weiber”. The number of soldiers in question thus becomes 9 instead of 3.

If the author, accordingly, has arrived at too low a figure when it was a question of finding out how many of the soldiers had had their feelings aroused by the acts of violence they reported, he, on the contrary, puts much higher the number of Germans who were compromised through these acts. He declares (pages 27 f.) that these “crimes” almost all of which were such as had been committed “en service commandé”, “engagent et déshonorent, non pas l’individu seulement, mais la troupe entière, l’officier, la nation.” The small number of documents whereupon the author bases his charges, he thus multiplies into thousands through the reasoning that “cest trente carnets, . . . pris au hasard, en doivent représenter des centaines et des milliers d’autres tout semblables.” But even if thousands of such really could be shown, it does not necessarily follow from this that the number of acts of violence had been equally large. For since the German soldiers are required to keep diaries of their military activities it of course happens not infrequently that the same case is related in hundreds of notebooks; in at least two of the author’s few sources it is thus the question of one and the same occurrence.

Then as to the author’s assertion that the acts of violence mentioned were almost all committed “en service commandé”, it is often enough not easy to determine which cases should be counted as belonging here. Such an uncertain case is that of pillaging mentioned on page 8 with the words: “alles wird geplündert”, which only in the author’s translation “Tout est livré au pillage”, could with certainty be counted as being committed in such a way; (for that matter, this case of pillage does not seem to have

been very severe, to judge by what is added in the notes immediately after, but which has been omitted by Bédier in his transcription: "Hüne alles ward abges . . . tet" = "Hühner alles ward abge(schlach)tet; cf. with "Hüne" the forms "sa" for "sah" and "Einwohn-e", "Donn-e" for "-er" in the same note). And even if commanders in several instances had ordered acts of violence, this can not compromise their whole nation, since they may often have had a special reason for it.

A circumstance that must be well noted in judging the acts of violence mentioned in the notes is, that many of these have been reprisals undertaken for the purpose of deterring the noncombatant population from further mixing in the war, and thereby making it still more terrible. Such is, for example, the case with the shooting of 50 civilians mentioned on page 10, note. If the author in his transcription and translation of this passage had given the continuation, even the reader who is but little acquainted with the German language and German script would have found out that by these shots which the civilians fired at the German troops, a German regiment had lost several men, and that, in addition, a large number of soldiers ("zahlreiche") had been wounded (see figure 3). After this information the reader would no doubt not have been surprised that these civilians were shot. That the German soldiers had repeatedly been exposed to shooting or attacks of other kinds from the civil population, is something that several of the notes published by Bédier show. Such cases are mentioned, according to the author's excerpts, pages 10, 11, 12, 14, 18 (2 or 3 cases on the same page), 21, and 37, and, to judge by the author's words, page 9, middle, also in other writings that he had gone over. From at least one note (figure 17) one sees, too, that the shooting of civilians had been carried out "standrechtlich", after an investigation and a sentence. The author ought not to forget, in regard to the "crimes" he tries to credit to the Germans, that some such acts of violence committed by the civilians were also crimes and transgressions that were the *causes* of the German acts.

If one takes sufficiently into consideration the circumstance just mentioned, and, furthermore, the fact that, as has been shown above, the author's worst accusations against the Germans: the mutilation of wounded, and violation of women en masse, are not proven by the published documents, the remaining acts of violence mentioned in his book, lamentable though they are, can in reality be ascribed to such things (cf. the author, page 27) "comme il peut s'en rencontrer, comme il s'en rencontre, hélas! dans les plus nobles armées."

The author concludes with a sharp rebuke of the ninety-three representatives of German science and culture who, according to him, have stated: "Il n'est pas vrai que nous fassions la guerre au mépris du droit de gens, et nos soldats ne commettent ni actes d'indiscipline ni cruautés". He commits an error here, too. They did not say that German "soldiers" commit no indisciplinary acts or atrocities, but that German "warfare" has not been guilty of such. Their purpose need therefore not have been to deny that individual soldiers may have committed acts of violence or that individual commanders may have set aside the demands of international law. When they expressed their conviction that the Germans are carrying

These civilians were already⁹ this invaded country. 20

on the war as a civilized people they merely defended, perhaps a little broadly, their countrymen fighting in the army. But what does the author himself do? In the same name of science and on the basis of a few documents that have been partly mistranslated and that deal in part only with individual cases, he has set forth most serious accusations against the whole German army and the German people. The ninety-three may have looked a little too much with eyes of love; Bédier has surely looked too much with eyes of distrust and enmity.

By that which I have said in this review I by no means want to assert that the author has consciously and intentionally misinterpreted the documents he has published. This I do not wish to believe. The dark clouds that have collected over his native country must have darkened his otherwise clear vision.

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